



U.S. soldiers patrol the streets of Gnjane, once a hotspot of ethnic violence.



Children in Gnjilane still rush out to greet the U.S. soldiers who patrol their neighborhood streets.

Though tensions in other parts of the world have shifted attention away from Kosovo, American soldiers continue to help keep the peace in the war-torn Balkan nation.

THE bumpy bus ride from Pristina — the main entry point for soldiers arriving in Kosovo — to Camp Bondsteel, the U.S. Army's largest complex in the war-torn country, took newly arriving soldiers past abandoned lots filled with rubble, and red brick and plaster homes without doors or windows.

Other scenes, which have only more recently colored Kosovo's landscape, included countless construction sites, where workers labored feverishly to repair roads, schools and other public facilities; bustling shopping areas; and high-rise apartment buildings where white satellite dishes adorned virtually every balcony.

Along the roadside, an old man sold baskets of red grapes, images of beautiful women lounging seductively in overhead billboards advertised cigarettes, and road signs read: "The European Union — Fixing Your Roads."

At night, florescent lights in psychedelic green, pink and blue framed the roofs of numerous gas stations, which are located intermittently along the route, like oases sandwiched between the areas of disrepair

≡ Changes for Soldiers

While U.S. soldiers continue to conduct security patrols to thwart potential ethnic violence and reduce the illegal smuggling of tobacco and firearms, much has changed to positively affect the daily lives of the local people and U.S. soldiers as well, said MAJ Mark Ballesteros, a 1st Infantry Division spokesman in Würzburg, Germany.

Since the first rotation of 1st Inf. Div. soldiers from

Return to Kosovo

Story and Photos by Heike Hasenauer



Soldiers of Company C, 1st Bn., 18th Inf., at Camp Rock, a remote outpost near the border with the FYROM, monitor vehicles entering and leaving the village of Debelde.

Camp Bondsteel today is a sprawling “city,” complete with soldier living areas, a hospital, recreation facilities and an outdoor café.

U.S. soldiers are no longer required to wear the cumbersome Kevlar helmets and flak vests they’ve routinely worn for protection while on patrol.



the Schweinfurt, Germany-based 2nd Brigade arrived in Kosovo in June 1999, decreased tensions and increased feelings of security among the Kosovar Albanians and the now-minority Serb population are perhaps the most visible signs of the changes Kosovo has undergone, Ballesteros said.

Today, U.S. soldiers are no longer required to wear the cumbersome

Kevlar helmets and flak vests they’ve routinely worn for protection while on patrol, said Ballesteros. It’s a decision left to individual unit commanders.

Additionally, groups of soldiers are authorized to patronize local, KFOR-approved establishments during specified periods, provided two soldiers remain outside to patrol, said CPT Robert Gagnon, civil affairs

officer for the division’s 1st Battalion, 26th Inf. Regiment.

And Camp Bondsteel, headquarters for the U.S. KFOR contingent, is a community unto itself. It boasts a full-fledged surgical hospital, two chapels, three dining facilities, two large gyms, a two-story post exchange — even a cappuccino bar with outdoor seating, just off a stage where Morale, Welfare

and Recreation-hosted concerts are performed.

Inside the MWR facility soldiers have access to computers and the Internet. They can check out books from the library or watch videos on a big-screen TV. Fresh popcorn is available on the way in. Movies are also shown at the camp's designated "theater."

"In 1999 soldiers from the 1st Inf. Div.'s 2nd Bde. were working seven days a week, nonstop," said COL Randal Dragon, then commander of the division's 1st Bn., 26th Inf. Regt. and current commander of the 2nd Bde. "Now they have some time for leisure activities, physical training and college courses. They also have time to correspond with family and friends."

Reduced tensions in Kosovo have afforded U.S. soldiers better opportunities to hone their combat skills, too. "There are 13 firing ranges on or around Camp Bondsteel," Dragon said. And Bradley and Abrams simulators are located at the Army's camps Magrath and Monteith.

"Every two weeks new guys come to our 'Falcon Five' range to qualify," said SSG Saifoloi Filisi, a member of the 1st Bn., 26th Inf. In six months we've been to different ranges seven times."

Other improvements for individual soldiers include video-teleconferencing capabilities at all the base camps, which help reduce the amount of time soldiers spend traveling to and from various locations for meetings. At the same time, they may use teleconferencing to talk "face-to-face" with loved ones back home, Dragon said.

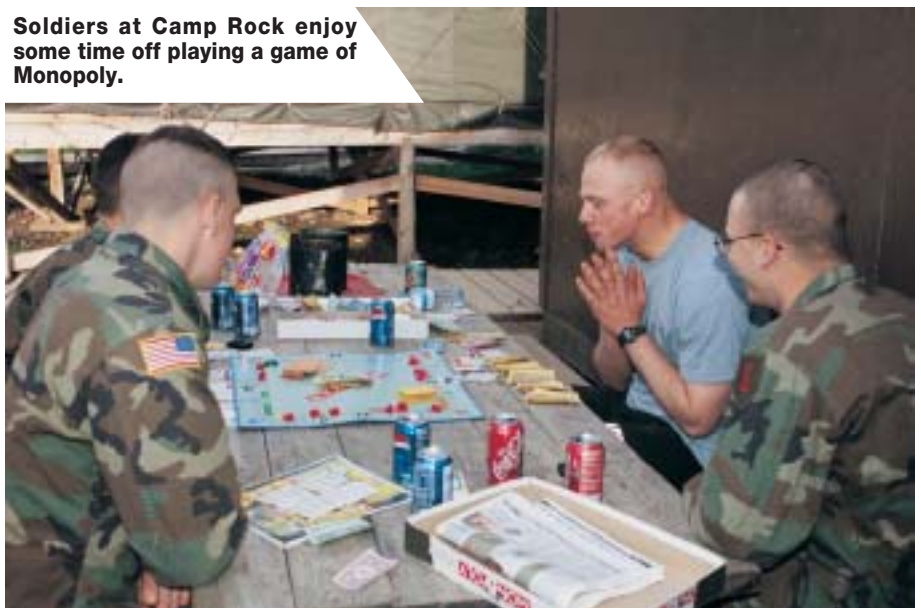
≡ 2nd Brigade Reflections

The 2nd Bde., which was the first large unit to enter Kosovo in June 1999 following the initial NATO air campaign, was also the first unit to return to Kosovo, Ballesteros said. (The division's 3rd Bde., which is currently in Kosovo, began arriving in November 2002 for its six-month rotation.)

If anyone can draw comparisons between Kosovo then and now,



Today Kosovars and Serbs alike can stroll the streets with minimal fear of being attacked by each other.



Soldiers at Camp Rock enjoy some time off playing a game of Monopoly.



Soldiers of the 1st Inf. Div.'s 1st Bn., 26th Inf., conduct a reconnaissance patrol in the village of Zegra.

soldiers of the 2nd Bde. can, he said.

Dragon went into Kosovo on June 17, 1999, he said, with two Bradley fighting vehicles. Every other day he brought a company of soldiers into Camp Able Sentry, in Skopje, Macedonia, then the initial staging area for troops moving into Kosovo.

Camp Bondsteel was just a large

area of plowed cornfields and tents. The main two-lane highway leading from Skopje to the camp was so congested that travelers spent hours trying to get to their destinations — a journey that today takes about an hour.

Dragon's first company arrived in country on June 19 and established "Radar Hill," he said. "We lived in

abandoned houses and factories. Soon thereafter, 12 U.S. platoon- and company-size units were positioned at 12 remote sites. We're down to four sites now. That says a lot for the present level of security.

"In those first weeks in country, security was limited," Dragon said. "There was no gate at Camp

Bondsteel. About 75 vehicles were lined up in the area, and our command operations center consisted of four integrated tents.”

Mines were prevalent, said Dragon, who recalled his first night in Kosovo. “In the municipality of Vitina, I watched what looked like a live-fire exercise. Tracers were going off all over the place,” he said. “And we were well aware that there were snipers who didn’t want us there.”

Communities were in shambles. Burned buildings dotted the landscape. And trash and debris littered hole-pocked streets, Dragon said.

Businesses and public facilities were closed because the Kosovar Albanians had all fled their homes. The country’s infrastructure lay in ruins. There was no civil police force, and the only medical care for critically injured mine-blast and gunshot-wound victims was provided by U.S. military forces at the combat area support hospital at Camp Bondsteel.

Chaos extended to the unlicensed, unregistered and often stolen cars that flooded the roads, Dragon said.

Kosovo Today

“I was here when the 1st Inf. Div. first arrived,” said SGT Henry Leeper of the 2nd Bde.’s 1st Bn., 77th Armor Regt., at Camp Monteith, near one of Kosovo’s largest cities, Gnjilane. “The locals were still doing ignorant stuff like burning each other’s houses down and killing each other.

“The peoples’ spirits have changed,” he said. “At first, everyone had a real dismal ‘I hate you’ kind of look on their faces. Now there are lots of smiles and friendly greetings.”

“There are still a lot of abandoned buildings,” added SSG Thomas Nunn of the division’s 1st Bn., 26th Inf.

“But the people have progressed to taking a more capitalistic view, as opposed to focusing on hatred of one another. They’re going on with their lives. They’re not throwing grenades at each other now. And they don’t need us as much as they did,” said Nunn, who was also among the first soldiers to arrive in Kosovo in 1999.

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In 1999, there was no electricity or water, said Gagnon, who was in Korea at the time but is well aware of the changes that have taken place in Kosovo since his unit’s first rotation.

Now water and electricity are available. Three power generators that supply all of Kosovo are at 80 percent capacity, Gagnon said. Additionally, in the last six months, engineers have completed two water projects and rebuilt three schools and two hospitals. And aid organizations have donated new medical equipment.

“There are a lot of people out on the streets to visit friends, shop or just enjoy the outdoors. Shops are open, and there’s plenty to buy,” Gagnon said.

And to protect the Serb population

from potential retaliatory ethnic violence by Kosovar Albanians, UN-operated buses transport the Serbs to Serb-operated markets several times a week, said SSG George Warren, of the 1st Bn., 77th Armor.

Kosovo today has its own democratically elected government and president. And the country’s infrastructure is steadily improving, according to a recent report by United Nations Mission in Kosovo officials. Utilities, telephones, banking services and a civil document system have been restored.

Today, some 40,000 UN troops compose five multinational brigades in Kosovo, Ballesteros said. Among them are about 5,000 U.S. soldiers who, as part of the Multinational Brigade-East, patrol areas in the eastern portion of the country. French, German, British and Italian brigades patrol the four remaining sectors.

And while the role of UN forces is still to maintain law and order, “armed activity has decreased dramatically, to the point that it’s a non-issue,” Ballesteros said.

In October 2002, posters like this one were affixed to buildings and electrical posts, encouraging the people of Kosovo to vote. Today Kosovo has its own democratically elected government and president.





U.S. officials say the people of Kosovo are approaching their pre-1998 standard of living, food is abundant and shops are full of items for sale.

≡ Continuing Hotspots

The exception is the Serb community of Klokot, a suburb of Vitina, in the U.S.-led sector. It remains a potential trouble spot, due in part to the 2001 border agreement between the Former Republic of Yugoslavia, or FRY, and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, or FYROM, Ballesteros said.

Under the agreement, land that belonged to Kosovar Albanian farmers for generations suddenly became part of Macedonia, Ballesteros said. "It's caused contention within the Albanian community in Vitina."

The unemployment rate is also a negative factor in Kosovo's effort to rebuild. In Gnjane, for example, 85 percent of the population is unemployed, said Warren. And of those who are fortunate enough to have jobs, the average salary is about 150 Euros (equivalent to \$150) per month, Warren said.

The smuggling of goods, such as cigarettes, also remains a problem, Gagnon added. Shop owners buy crates of cigarettes that have been brought into the country illegally to avoid paying taxes on them. Some soldiers have said the quality of the tobacco used in these cigarettes, which sell for 3.70 Euros (or \$3.70) per

carton, can't compare to the U.S. standard.

≡ Camp Rock

On a mountaintop in Kosovo, just 1,000 meters from the FYROM, three platoons of 1st Inf. Div. soldiers live in wooden huts at Camp Rock, and they're not the popular U.S. contractor-built SEAhuts prevalent at other U.S. base camps in Kosovo. One shack looks like a conglomeration of scrap wood pieced together, with olive-drab tarp covering any openings.

Because there is no dining facility at the site, helicopters of the division's 2nd Bn., 1st Aviation Regt., at Camp Bondsteel deliver dinner every day, said SSG Scott Rideout, of the 1st Bn., 18th Inf. Regt.

The soldiers deployed to this site rotate out to Camp Magrath every 10 days or so, Rideout said, so they can take advantage of such "creature comforts" as hot showers and regular dining-facility meals.

"Being at Camp Rock has its advantages," he continued. "It's about as far away from the 'flagpole' as you can get. And the view of the valley below is awesome." In the autumn, it's like being in the Shenandoah Valley in West Virginia, said Rideout. "Also, we can practice our infantry tactics here

without interruptions."

Cows plod down the mountain, just outside the camp's concertina-wire perimeter, the bells around their necks clanging persistently.

From his lookout, a soldier on watch can peer into the FYROM, where U.S. soldiers patrol the valley for smugglers. And he can see the red roofs of the houses in the Kosovar village of Debelde. The soldiers at Camp Rock monitor vehicles entering the village to help deter smuggling and monitor the refugee flow between the FYROM and Kosovo, Rideout said.

≡ Camp Zegra

"There's a large population of displaced people here," said 1LT David Alvarey, fire-support officer for the 1st Bn., 26th Inf. Regt., which has two platoons stationed at Camp Zegra, a tiny U.S. outpost near the FYROM border.

As the unit's information officer, Alvarey confers with community leaders regularly to stay abreast of local events and prevent illegal activities.

Many Serbs lived in the area before the NATO bombing campaign was conducted against Yugoslavia in 1999. The bombing was triggered by now-deposed Yugoslav president Slobodan

"One of the major thrusts here has been to establish a civilian institution that will last after we're gone."

Milosevic's repression of the province's ethnic Albanian majority, Alvarey said.

The city of Donja Budriga lies several miles to the north of Camp Zegra, he added. "The Serbs who once lived in Zegra moved to Donja Budriga because it was the closest established Serb town."

Recently, PV2 Jeff Herling of the 1st Bn., 26th Inf., went door to door counting people, taking names and inquiring about what jobs the people perform — for a national census. "I discovered that most of the people in the villages are farmers, loggers or small-shop owners," he said.

"We're also gathering intelligence on abandoned buildings, businesses and their owners, and such landmarks as the school and the mosque," said Nunn. "We're taking photos of people and places to hand over to the next unit that comes in so they won't have to repeat the research we've already done."

≡ Sporadic Violence

The soldiers who conduct presence patrols and perform vehicle checks and reconnaissance have witnessed several "incidents" during the 2nd Bde.'s most recent rotation, Ballesteros said. One involved five explosions in a Klokot housing area in July in which two U.S. soldiers were injured.

In October 2002, witnesses reported a Serb woman was killed when she stepped on a mine while working in a cornfield. And several U.S. soldiers barely escaped injury after a

Serb man asked them to remove an unidentified bag from his porch. Just after the soldiers moved the bag it exploded, Ballesteros said.

"I've seen places like this on CNN, but being here has given me a whole new perspective," said PFC Jason Digham. He was in the area when a local resident fired an AK-47 assault rifle.

"Later we found out that it's a tradition in Kosovo to fire a weapon during a wedding ceremony," Digham said. The man, who was later confronted about the firearm, realized his mistake and turned the weapon over to military officials without incident, Digham said.

≡ Kosovo's Future

"When I first saw all the construction at Camp Bondsteel, I thought, 'The U.S. Army is building a whole new city.' And they were," said a local Kosovar-Albanian man who is a driver for U.S. personnel at Camp Bondsteel. "I know the Army's going to be here for a long time."

That belief gives the local people great hope for the future, the driver said. Besides the obvious security issues answered by KFOR's presence, the coalition forces' installations have provided many jobs for local citizens.

The U.N. Mission in Kosovo, the recently formed Kosovo Police Service, and numerous other aid organizations also provide job opportunities, from drivers, to grounds and maintenance personnel, to food-service workers and cashiers, bookkeepers and medical professionals.

"One of the major thrusts here has been to establish a civilian institution that will last after we're gone," said Dragon. "The Kosovo Police Service, for example, is a multi-ethnic organization of Kosovar Albanians and Serbs.

The KPS is an eight-year program that began almost three years ago, said Gagnon. Its members, composed of 70 percent Serbs and 30 percent Albanians, undergo one year of training before joining the force. Later, they work joint patrols.

"The people are approaching their pre-1998 standard of living," Dragon added. In September 1999, medics saw four trauma cases per week resulting from gunshot wounds and mine explosions. Today, such cases are few and far between.

Additionally, civilian hospitals are now operating efficiently, and some of them are multi-ethnic, Dragon said.

"Order has come to a place that only two years ago was in total chaos," he said. □



Soldiers at Camp Zegra pull guard duty at one of the most austere U.S. camps in Kosovo.